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Method and apparatus for changing received streaming content channels

Abstract:

An apparatus and method is disclosed in which a buffer receives a first content stream (201) carrying a content channel signal. The first content stream (201) carries the content channel signal at a rate substantially greater than the streaming content playout rate, for initially loading the buffer. The buffer switches its reception of the content channel signal from the first content stream (201) to a second content stream (202). The second content stream (202) is at a rate substantially the same as the streaming content playout rate. Generally, this switch occurs when some predefined threshold of the content channel signal is buffered.

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(54) Method and apparatus for changing received streaming content channels

(57) An apparatus and method is disclosed in which a buffer receives a first content stream (201) carrying a content channel signal. The first content stream (201) carries the content channel signal at a rate substantially greater than the streaming content playout rate, for initially loading the buffer. The buffer switches its reception of the content channel signal from the first content stream (201) to a second content stream (202). The second content stream (202) is at a rate substantially the same as the streaming content playout rate. Generally, this switch occurs when some predefined threshold of the content channel signal is buffered.

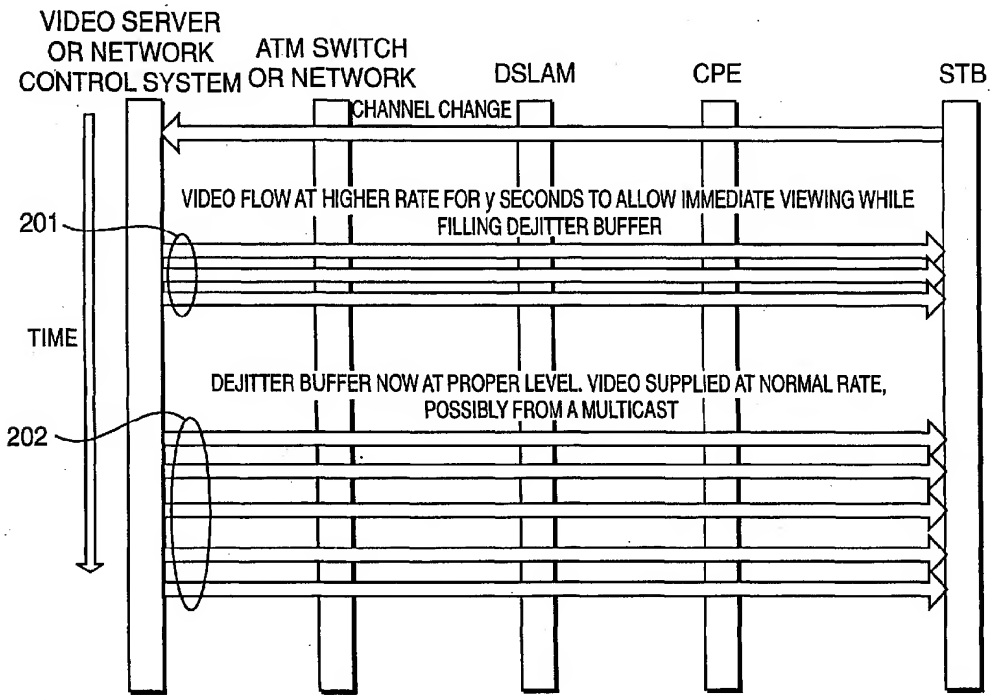

FIG. 2

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Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to the downloading of streaming content.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Proposed methods for carrying digital video programming from a Head End (HE) to a Set Top Box (STB), over a Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) connection, now exist within the industry. In many cases, the digital video is in the form of compressed digital video such as Moving Pictures Experts Group (MPEG) 2 or MPEG 4. Many of these systems utilize video multicast within the HE equipment for efficient distribution of the video to the edge of the network. An important limitation of these systems is that a DSL link has only enough bandwidth to handle one or two video streams (programs) simultaneously.

[0003] Because of the bandwidth limitation, one problem that these systems experience is jitter. Jitter is a deviation in, or displacement of, the bit arrival times of a digital signal. Some of the principle causes of jitter include, *inter alia,* queues in network switches and packet collisions requiring subsequent retransmission. Jitter may also be added to the video stream as the result of the asynchronous transfer mode (ATM) switching or Internet Protocol (IP) routing. Furthermore, jitter may occur as a result of adding to a video stream as the video is distributed within the home from the DSL modem to the STB over, for example, an Ethernet.

[0004] Proposed methods for correcting jitter include, for example, the use of a large de-jittering buffer in the front end of the decoder in the STB. However, de-jittering buffers add a significant and undesirable time delay to the signal. For example, for a de-jittering buffer designed to hold five seconds of video, there would be a five-second delay from the time the video is received by the STB to the time that the video is displayed.

[0005] Buffering creates additional problems. For example, if a user changes channels and the system merely connects the STB to a real time video stream, the user will have to wait five seconds for the buffer to fill before a picture will be displayed. This would spoil the channel changing experience that many people expect. For example, many people like to "surf" channels to examine what is on a several particular television channels before settling on a program. Having a long delay each time a new channel is selected would be at odds with the ability to rapidly surf through the various offered channels, and these viewers would find such a delay particularly vexing.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] Therefore, the present invention is a system and method for providing de-jittered streaming content while providing a substantially instantaneous channel changing experience. In accordance with the principles of the present invention, a buffer receives a first content stream carrying a content channel signal. The first content stream carries the content channel signal at a rate substantially greater than the streaming content playout rate. The buffer switches its reception of the content channel signal from the first content stream to a second content stream. The second content stream is at a rate substantially the same as the streaming content playout rate. Generally, this switch occurs when some predefined threshold of the content channel signal is buffered.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] The present invention will be described below in more detail, with reference to the accompanying drawings:

Fig. 1 illustrates a network capable of delivering DSL video in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

Fig. 2 shows a flow diagram of a channel change mechanism in accordance with the principles of the present invention; and

Fig. 3 shows a data transfer from a source buffer to a de-jitter buffer during initial viewing in accordance with the principles of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0008] The present invention delivers video data to a STB at a rate substantially greater than a display rate for an initial period of time after a new channel has been selected. During this initial time period, a STB buffer is loaded to a desired level. Upon loading the STB buffer, the video connection can be switched to a video multicast connection wherein the STB video decoder receives buffered video from the STB buffer at substantially the same rate as the video display rate. Further, although described in terms of video, the concept and principles of the present invention apply to any form of streaming digital, whether it is video, audio, data, or a combination thereof.

[0009] It is to be understood that the present invention may be implemented in various forms of hardware, software, firmware, special purpose processors, or a combination thereof. It is also understood that the present invention may be implemented in software as an application program tangibly embodied on a program storage device. The application program may be uploaded to, and executed by, a machine comprising any suitable architecture. In an exemplary embodiment, the machine is implemented on a computer platform having hardware such as one or more central processing units (CPU), a random access memory (RAM), and input/output (I/O) interface(s). The computer platform also in-

cludes an operating system and micro instruction code. The various processes and functions described herein may either be part of the micro instruction code or part of the application program (or a combination thereof) which is executed via the operating system. In addition, various other peripheral devices may be connected to the computer platform such as an additional data storage device and a printing device.

[0010] It is to be further understood that, because some of the constituent system components and method steps depicted in the accompanying description and figures may be implemented in software, the actual connections between the system components (or the process steps) may differ depending upon the manner in which the present invention is programmed. Given the teachings of the present invention provided herein, one of ordinary skill in the related art will be able to contemplate these and similar implementations or configurations of the present invention.

[0011] According to an embodiment of the present invention, in systems in which the quantity and severity of jitter is frequently a problem, such as in distribution across the Internet, larger de-jittering buffers can be provided on the front end of the decoder which would thereby decrease the instances and severity of jitter by increasing the amount of available buffered video.

[0012] Additionally, the present invention can apply to any system distributing video over the Internet from a video server. The final distribution can be via DSL, dial up, cable modem, Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), or any other means of connecting to the Internet. The present invention also applies to systems or network connections that use multicast signals for efficient distribution or simply duplicate the stream and send out individual streams.

[0013] Referring to Fig. 1, an illustrative example of a network for delivering DSL video is shown including, *inter alia,* a video server 101, and ATM switch 102, a Service Control Processor (SCP) 103. The network includes a DSL Access Multiplexor (DSLAM) 104, for connecting multiple DSL users to the network. The DSLAM 104 connects to the ATM switch 102. The DSLAM 104 demultiplexes the signals and forwards them to appropriate individual DSL connections. The network further includes a DSL Terminator 105, router 106, customer premise equipment (CPE) 107, a STB 108. The video server 101 includes a buffer for each video channel that may be chosen. These buffers can be sized to handle a worst-case jitter scenario that may be displayed at the STB 108, including jitter contributed by the ATM distribution and jitter caused by distribution within a local area network such as Ethernet.

[0014] Jitter can range from a few milliseconds to several seconds depending on the distribution channel used. A communication channel for channel changing commands exists between the STB 108 and the HE equipment 109. When a customer turns on a channel or changes channels, a command is sent from the STB 108 to the HE 109. The SCP 103 sets up a connection between the video server 101 and the STB 108. The video server 101 provides video from a HE buffer to the STB buffer 108 at a substantially higher speed (e.g., double-speed) than a normal video viewing speed (e.g., thirty frames per second).

[0015] In one exemplary embodiment of the invention, during the transitory period, the connection is set up logically as a point-to-point connection. No other STB will receive the same higher speed stream at exactly the same time. The STB receives the higher speed video stream and starts to display the stream immediately. However, it displays the video at the normal viewing speed. Thus, the video arrives at the STB at a rate faster than it is being displayed or consumed. Accordingly, the de-jittering buffer in the front end of the STB is loaded with video. Once the STB buffer has been filled to a desirable level, the SCP switches the video source to a video stream that can be shared among one or more STBs (e.g., multicast).

[0016] Referring to Fig. 2, for live broadcasts, the HE will maintain a buffer that is at least as large as the buffer used for de-jittering in the STB. For example, for a five second STB de-jittering buffer, the HE buffer would store five seconds or more of video. When the customer changes channels, the HE will supply delayed video from the HE buffer at a rate 201 higher, e.g., sixty frames per second, than the video rate for normal viewing 202, e.g., thirty frames per second.

[0017] In an exemplary embodiment of the invention, the HE buffer is a circular buffer or queue that maintains a level of information. The HE's transmitter will be merely pulling the data from a progressively later time in the buffer. The buffer remains full at all times, and can therefore handle multiple clients simultaneously by pulling data from different times in the buffer. Data is transferred out of the buffer at a 1X rate, even though data is being sent to the STB buffer at a higher rate, e.g., 3X. However, from the perspective of the STB, it appears that the HE buffer empties.

[0018] Since the video is being displayed at the normal speed, but the stream is arriving at the higher speed, the de-jittering buffer in the front end of the decoder will fill to a desirable level. According to the example, once this buffer has filled with five-seconds of video, the HE ceases sending video to the STBs at the higher speed and begins to send video at the normal viewing speed. This can happen in a one-to-one relationship, but can also happen by merely switching the input of the STB to a multicast or broadcast video stream. The Multicast stream is sent in real-time. During the initial stage, the five second delay is due to five seconds of old data being sent from the HE buffer. After switching to multicast, all of the delay is due to five seconds of video stored in the STB buffer.

[0019] The switch from the HE buffered signal to the video stream can be controlled from the HE, because the HE knows at what point the STB has received all of

the delayed video from the HE delay buffer and the only video left to send is the real-time video that is being used to fill the delay buffer.

[0020] Referring to Fig. 3, during the transitory channel changing period 301-303, data is transferred from a HE buffer 304-307 to the STB buffer 308-311 until the desired delay is established before switching to the buffered broadcast stream 312. Note that this method can apply to real-time broadcasts such as sports programs, movies, or any other type of video programming.

[0021] It is also possible that some video data may arrive late during the initial few moments after the second change. But the packet delay associated with most video packets is expected to be less than the maximum delay, so this is not expected to be objectionable. Additionally, the likelihood of encountering a late packet will decrease as the decoding buffer fills.

[0022] Having described embodiments for a system and method of de-jittering a DSL video distribution system connection, it is noted that modifications and variations can be made by persons skilled in the art in light of the above teachings. It is therefore to be understood that changes may be made in the particular embodiments of the invention disclosed which are within the scope and spirit of the invention as defined by the appended claims. Having thus described the invention with the details and particularity required by the patent laws, what is claimed and desired protected by Letters Patent is set forth in the appended claims.

Claims

1. A method for transferring a digital signal **characterized by** the steps of:

   receiving, at a buffer and at a rate substantially greater than a streaming content playout rate, a first content stream carrying a content channel signal (201); and
   switching from the first content stream to a second content stream carrying the content channel signal, wherein the second content stream is transferred to the buffer substantially at the display rate (202).

2. The method of claim 1, **characterized in that** the content channel signal is comprised of streaming video.

3. The method of claim 1, **characterized in that** the content channel signal is comprised of streaming audio data.

4. The method of claim 1, **characterized in that** the step of switching from the first content stream to the second content stream further comprises the step of:

   determining that the buffer is substantially full prior to switching.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of switching from the first content stream to the second content stream further **characterized by** the step of:

   determining that the buffer contains a predefined amount of channel content data prior to switching.

6. The method of claim 1, **characterized in that** the second content stream is of the type selected from the group consisting of multicast, broadcast, and asynchronous-transfer-mode point-multipoint.

7. An apparatus for transferring a digital signal **characterized by**:

   means for receiving at a buffer, and at a rate substantially greater than a streaming content playout rate, a first content stream carrying a content channel signal (201); and
   means for switching from the first content stream to a second content stream carrying the content channel signal, wherein the second content stream is transferred to the buffer substantially at the display rate (202).

8. A method for changing from a first digital video channel to a second digital video channel **characterized by** the steps of:

   receiving a channel change command;
   transferring a first video stream carrying the second digital video channel from a first buffer to at least a second buffer at a rate greater than a display rate (201);
   changing from the first digital video channel to the second digital video channel upon receiving the second digital video channel; and
   switching from the first video stream to a second video stream carrying the second digital video channel, wherein the second video stream is transferred to the second buffer at the display rate (202).

9. The method of claim 8, **characterized in that** the first and second video streams comprise a digital subscriber line signal.

10. The method of claim 8, **characterized in that** the step of switching from the first video stream to the second video stream further comprises the step determining that the second buffer has been filled to a desirable level prior to switching.

11. The method of claim 8, further **characterized by** the

step of loading the first buffer with the first video stream at about the display rate.

12. The method of claim 8, **characterized by** the step of receiving a channel change command further comprises the step of establishing a one-to-one connection between the first buffer and the second buffer.

13. The method of claim 8, **characterized in that** the second video stream is one of multicast, broadcast, and asynchronous-transfer-mode point-multipoint.

14. The method of claim 8, **characterized in that** the digital video channel is distributed to the second buffer by one of a digital subscriber line, a cable modem and an integrated services digital network.

15. A program storage device readable by machine, tangibly embodying a program of instructions executable by the machine to perform method steps for changing from a first digital video channel to a second digital video channel, the method steps **characterized by**:

receiving a channel change command;
transferring a first video stream carrying the second digital video channel from a first buffer to at least a second buffer at a rate greater than a display rate (201);
changing from the first digital video channel to the second digital video channel upon receiving the second digital video channel; and
switching from the first video stream to a second video stream carrying the second digital video channel, wherein the second video stream is transferred to the second buffer at the display rate (202).

16. An apparatus for changing from a first digital video channel to a second digital video channel **characterized by** the:

means for receiving a channel change command;
means for transferring a first video stream carrying the second digital video channel from a first buffer to at least a second buffer at a rate greater than a display rate (201);
means for changing from the first digital video channel to the second digital video channel upon receiving the second digital video channel; and
means for switching from the first video stream to a second video stream carrying the second digital video channel, wherein the second video stream is transferred to the second buffer at the display rate (202).

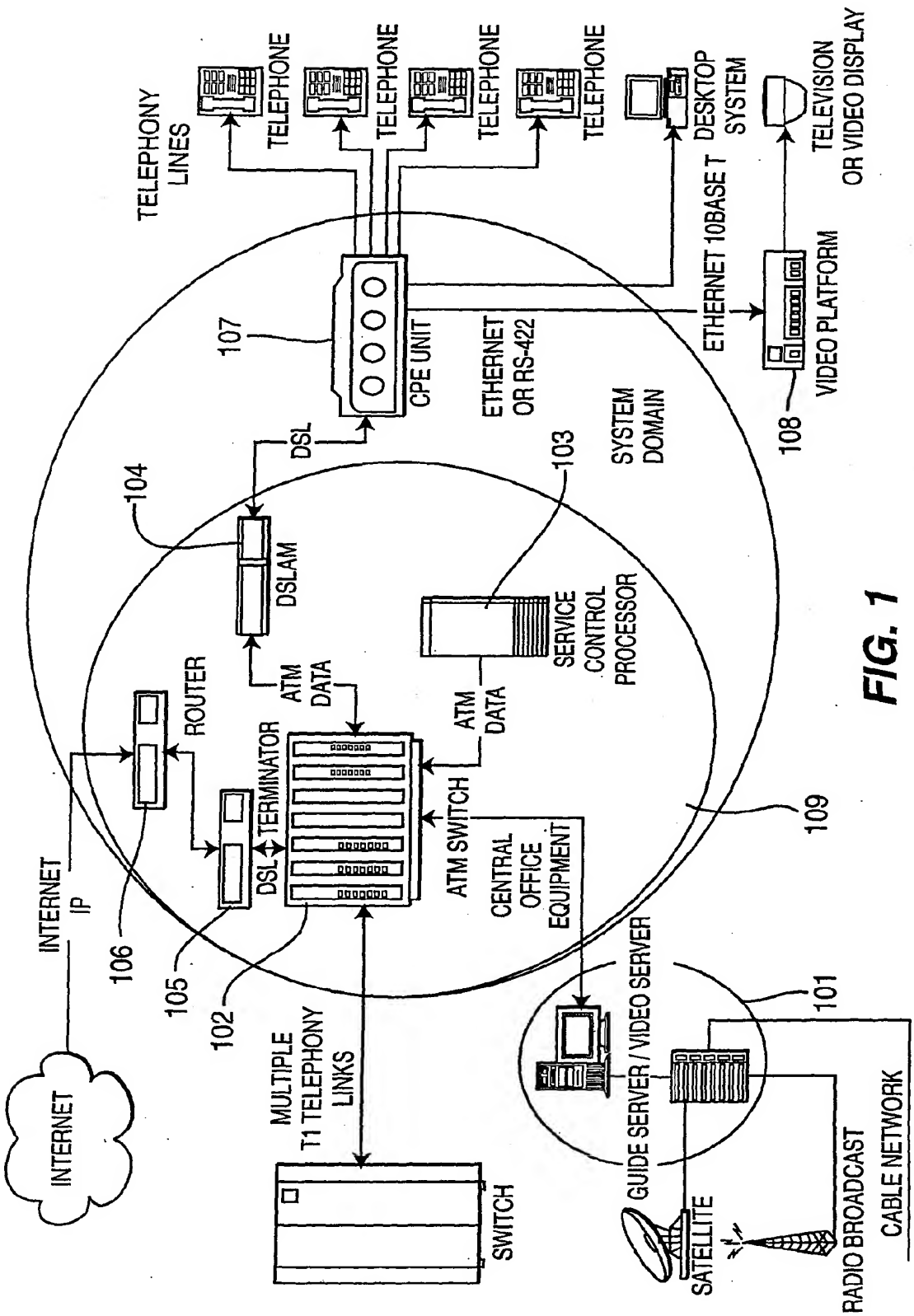
TELEPHONY LINES
TELEPHONE
TELEPHONE
TELEPHONE
TELEPHONE
DESKTOP SYSTEM
TELEVISION OR VIDEO DISPLAY
107
CPE UNIT
ETHERNET OR RS-422
ETHERNET 10BASE T
VIDEO PLATFORM
108
DSL
104
DSLAM
SYSTEM DOMAIN
103
SERVICE CONTROL PROCESSOR
ATM DATA
ATM DATA
ROUTER
TERMINATOR
DSL
ATM SWITCH
CENTRAL OFFICE EQUIPMENT
109
INTERNET IP
106
105
102
MULTIPLE T1 TELEPHONY LINKS
INTERNET
GUIDE SERVER / VIDEO SERVER
101
SWITCH
SATELLITE
RADIO BROADCAST
CABLE NETWORK

FIG. 1

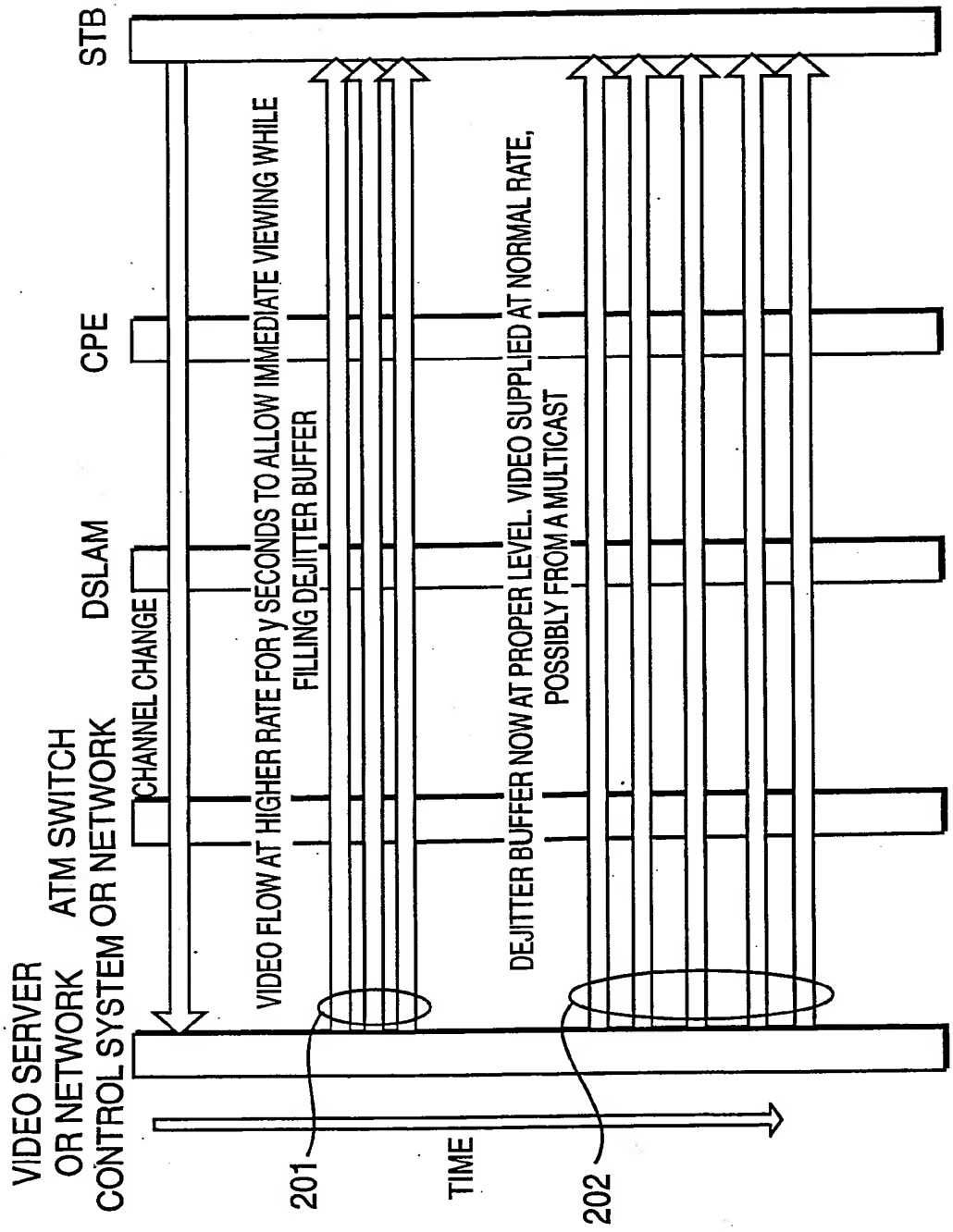
VIDEO SERVER OR NETWORK CONTROL SYSTEM
ATM SWITCH OR NETWORK
DSLAM
CPE
STB
CHANNEL CHANGE
VIDEO FLOW AT HIGHER RATE FOR y SECONDS TO ALLOW IMMEDIATE VIEWING WHILE FILLING DEJITTER BUFFER
DEJITTER BUFFER NOW AT PROPER LEVEL. VIDEO SUPPLIED AT NORMAL RATE, POSSIBLY FROM A MULTICAST
201
TIME
202

FIG. 2

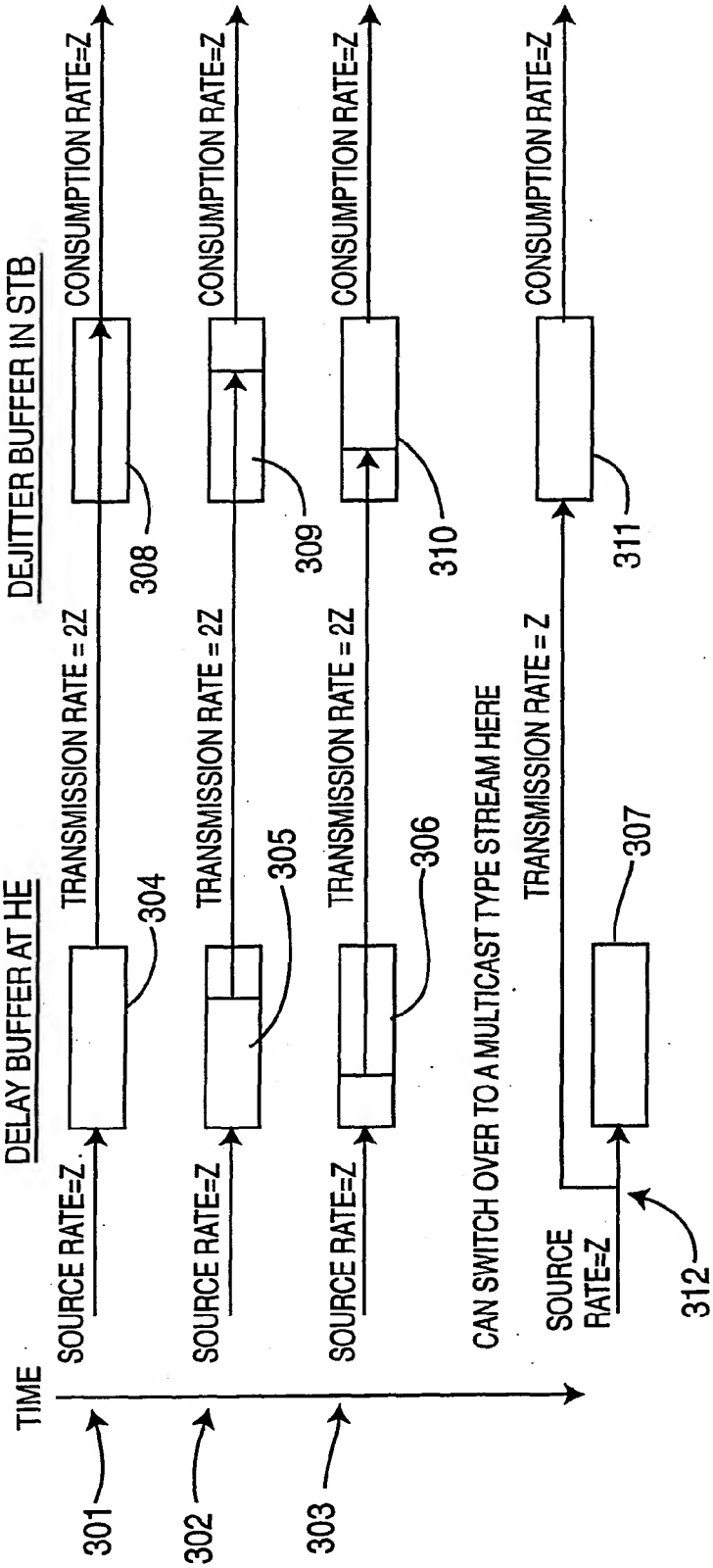
DELAY BUFFER AT HE
DEJITTER BUFFER IN STB
TIME
SOURCE RATE=Z
TRANSMISSION RATE = 2Z
CONSUMPTION RATE=Z
304
308
305
309
306
310
307
311
312
301
302
303
CAN SWITCH OVER TO A MULTICAST TYPE STREAM HERE
SOURCE RATE=Z
TRANSMISSION RATE = Z

FIG. 3

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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 02 10 2330

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
X	DER-JEN LU ET AL: "Experience in designing a TCP/IP based VOD system over a dedicated network" CONSUMER ELECTRONICS, 1997. ISCE '97., PROCEEDINGS OF 1997 IEEE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON SINGAPORE 2-4 DEC. 1997, NEW YORK, NY, USA,IEEE, US, 2 December 1997 (1997-12-02), pages 262-266, XP010268658 ISBN: 0-7803-4371-9 * abstract * paragraph 4 * figure 5 * ---	1-16	H04N7/173 H04N7/24
X	KAMIYAMA N ET AL: "Renegotiated CBR transmission in interactive video-on-demand system" MULTIMEDIA COMPUTING AND SYSTEMS '97. PROCEEDINGS., IEEE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON OTTAWA, ONT., CANADA 3-6 JUNE 1997, LOS ALAMITOS, CA, USA,IEEE COMPUT. SOC, US, 3 June 1997 (1997-06-03), pages 12-19, XP010239167 ISBN: 0-8186-7819-4 paragraphs 4.5 and 4.6 * abstract * --- -/--	1-16	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7) H04N

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
MUNICH	19 December 2002	Noll, B

CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS

X : particularly relevant if taken alone
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A : technological background
O : non-written disclosure
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E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date
D : document cited in the application
L : document cited for other reasons

& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document

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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 02 10 2330

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
A	WU-CHI FENG: "Critical bandwidth allocation techniques for stored video delivery across best-effort networks" DISTRIBUTED COMPUTING SYSTEMS, 2000. PROCEEDINGS. 20TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON TAIPEI, TAIWAN 10-13 APRIL 2000, LOS ALAMITOS, CA, USA,IEEE COMPUT. SOC, US, 10 April 2000 (2000-04-10), pages 56-63, XP010379015 ISBN: 0-7695-0601-1 1. Introduction ---	1-16	
A	HALVORSEN P ET AL: "Q-L/MRP: a buffer management mechanism for QoS support in a multimedia DBMS" MULTI-MEDIA DATABASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS, 1998. PROCEEDINGS. INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON DAYTON, OH, USA 5-7 AUG. 1998, LOS ALAMITOS, CA, USA,IEEE COMPUT. SOC, US, 5 August 1998 (1998-08-05), pages 162-171, XP010298813 ISBN: 0-8186-8676-6 abstract, paragraph 5.1 -----	1-16	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
MUNICH	19 December 2002	Noll, B

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X : particularly relevant if taken alone
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A : technological background
O : non-written disclosure
P : intermediate document

T : theory or principle underlying the invention
E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date
D : document cited in the application
L : document cited for other reasons

& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document

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